

CHAPTER TEN

ARABIC PALAEOGRAPHY AND ORTHOGRAPHY IN THE QUR'ĀN

The lapse of years and wizenning of new nations can cause dramatic changes in spelling conventions, retaining certain peculiarities from the past while others evolve or become obsolete. Back in 1965 while I was working towards my Ph.D at Cambridge, I came across a young British student who was studying Arabic to be an Orientalist by profession. He complained about the absurdity of Arabic orthography and how difficult it was to master, insisting that the Arabs ought to switch to Latin script – as was the case in modern day Turkey – which made more ‘sense’. I countered him with the absurdity of the *a* sound in *father*, *fat*, *fate*, *shape*; and *u* in *put*, *but*; not to mention *right* and *write*, and the past and present tenses of *read*. A plethora of examples were burning holes in my pockets from my sheer frustrations while learning English as a third language. He argued that these irregularities were owing to individual words and their historical development, but he seemed to overlook that if English had the unquestionable right to these peculiarities then it was only fair that the same should be afforded to Arabic.

Below I have provided the verbatim title of a randomly chosen (and typically verbose) English treatise from the 17th century C.E., to illustrate the orthographic changes that have taken place in under four centuries.

The Boy of Bilson: or, A True Discovery of the late notorious Impositions of *certaine* Romish Priests in their pretended *Exorcisme*, or expulsion of the *Divell* out of a young boy, named William Perry, *sonne* of Thomas Perry of Bilson, in the country of Stafford, Yeoman. Upon which occasion, hereunto is permitted A *briefe* Theological Discourse, by way of Caution, for the more *ease* discerning of such Romish spirits; and *iudging* of their false pretences, both in this and the like Practices.¹

The spelling may seem laughable by our current criteria, but it is in complete accordance with the established standards of 17th century England.

¹ Peter Milward, *Religious Controversies of the Jacobean Age (A Survey of Printed Sources)*, The Scolar Press, London, 1978, p. 197. This is the actual title of a book published in 1622 C.E. I have italicised the words that have different spellings than our current standard. Notice that ‘judging’ is written with an ‘i’ instead of ‘j’.

In some languages certain characters enjoy dual functions; the letters *i* and *u* were used as both vowels and consonants in Latin,² with the consonantal *i* being pronounced as 'y' in *yes*. In some texts the consonantal *i* is written as *j*. Again in Latin, the letter *b* was pronounced 'p' if followed by *s* (e.g. *abstuli* = *apstuli*), otherwise it was akin to the English 'b'.³ Interestingly, the letter *j* came into existence only recently (c. 16th or 17th century), long after the invention of the printing press.⁴ In German we have vowels which are modified by the umlaut sign, e.g. *ä*, *ö*, *ü*, which were originally spelled *ae*, *oe*, *ue* respectively.⁵ The letter *b* is pronounced either as 'b' in *ball* (when initial) or as 'p' in *tap* (when being last in a word or syllable), while *d* is pronounced either as 'd' or 't'. The letter *g* can elicit six different sounds according to the local dialect.

The same phenomenon exists in Arabic. Some tribes would pronounce the word حتى (*hattā*) as عتي (*'attā*), and صراط (*ṣirāṭ*) as سراط (*ṣirāṭ*), etc., and this was the root cause of many of the known variants in recitation. Similarly the letters ا, و, ي have the dual function of consonant and vowel, as in Latin. The question of how early Arab writers and copyists used these three letters requires special attention. Their methods, though puzzling to us now, were straightforward enough to them.

From this brief introduction, let us delve into the system of Arabic orthography during the early centuries of Islam.

1. Writing Styles During the Time of the Prophet

In Madinah the Prophet had an enormous number of scribes originating from various tribes and localities, accustomed to different dialects and spelling conventions. For example, Yaḥyā says that he witnessed a letter dictated by the Prophet to Khālīd b. Sa'īd b. al-'Āṣ which contained a few peculiarities: كان (*kāna*) was written كون (*kawana*), and حتى (*hattā*) was spelled حتا.⁶ Another document, handed by the Prophet to Razīn bin Anas as-Sulamī, also spelled كان as كون.⁷ The use of double ي (ييد), which has long since been contracted into a single ي, is evident in بايد⁸ and غير (of course without skeletal dots)

² F.L. Moreland and R.M. Fleischer, *Latin: An Intensive Course*, p. 1.

³ *ibid.*, p. 2.

⁴ "How Was Jesus Spelled?", *Biblical Archaeology Review*, May/June 2000, vol. 26, no. 3, p. 66.

⁵ *Harper's Modern German Grammar*, London, 1960, pp. ix-xvi.

⁶ For details see Ibn Abī Dāwūd, *al-Maṣāḥif*, p. 104.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 105.

⁸ Qur'ān 51:47.

in the Prophet's letters.⁹ A document from the third century A.H. draws a couple of letters in multiple ways.¹⁰ There is no shortage of evidence regarding the variance in writing styles during the early days of Islam.

2. *Studies on the Orthography of 'Uthmān's Muṣḥaf*

Numerous books allude to the spelling peculiarities found in 'Uthmān's Muṣḥaf, with some of the more detailed ones analysing all instances of spelling anomalies. Among the chapters in *al-Muqni'*, for example, one bears the heading, "Examination of Muṣḥaf spellings where [vowels are] dropped or listed. [Subheading:] Examination of words where *alif* (ا) is dropped for abbreviation." Ad-Dānī quoting Nāfi' bin Abī Nu'aim (c. 70-167 A.H.), the original author, then produces a list of the verses where *alif* is pronounced but not written:

<i>Sūra: verse</i>	<i>The spelling used in 'Uthmān's Muṣḥaf</i>	<i>Actual pronunciation</i>
2:9	وما يخذعون	وما يخذعون
2:51	واذ وعدنا موسى	واذ واعدنا موسى
20:80	وواعدناكم	وواعدناكم

These three instances I chose arbitrarily, otherwise the examples in his book occupy the length of twenty pages. Additionally, *alif* in 'Uthmān's Muṣḥaf is universally removed from السموت and سموت (a total of 190 occurrences), except in verse 41:12 where it is spelled السموات.¹¹ Randomly perusing the present-day Muṣḥaf printed by the King Fahd Complex in Madinah, I have verified this one instance of anomalous spelling, and so far have found nothing in my cursory searches to contradict Nāfi's tabulated results.¹² The two remaining vowels along with the *hamza* (ء) also display a dynamic tendency for change, one which is not limited to 'Uthmān's Muṣḥaf. Of the Companions who penned their own private copies many incorporated additional peculiarities based, perhaps, on regional differences in spelling. Here are two examples:

⁹ M. Hamidullah, *Six Originaux Des Lettres Du Prophete De L'Islam*, pp. 127-133.

¹⁰ See the discussion on *Gharīb al-Ḥadīth* manuscript in this work, pp. 146-7.

¹¹ Ad-Dānī, *al-Muqni'*, pp. 20, 27.

¹² The copy I used, which is well known throughout the world, is without doubt one of the most accurate printings of the Muṣḥaf; for this the Center deserves our due congratulations and gratitude.

- (a) 'Abdul-Fattāḥ ash-Shalabī discovered an old Qur'ānic manuscript in which the scribe used two different spellings of *على* (i.e. *على* and *علا*) on the same page.¹³
- (b) In the Raza Library Collection, Rampur, India, there is a Muṣḥaf written in Kūfic script attributed to 'Alī bin Abī Ṭālib. The word *على* is again spelled as *علا*, and *حتى* is spelled as *حتا*. I have provided a sample page below.¹⁴



Figure 10.1: The Kūfic Muṣḥaf attributed to 'Alī bin Abī Ṭālib, where *حتى* is spelled *حتا* (seventh line from the top) and *على* is spelled *علا* (fourth line from the bottom). Courtesy Rampur Raza Library, India.

Mālik bin Dīnār reports that 'Ikrima would recite verse 17:107 as *fas'al* (فسأل), though it is written *fsl* (فسل). Mālik reconciled this by saying that it

¹³ Ash-Shalabī, *Rasm al-Muṣḥaf*, pp. 72-73. In a similar case, the Muṣḥaf of 'Alqama (d. after 60 A.H./679 C.E.), brought to light by Ibrāhīm an-Nakha'ī (d. 96 A.H.), spelled the letter *alif* both in the traditional form and in the form of the letter *ya'* – meaning that certain words with *alif* had two interchangeable forms (e.g. *حتى* and *حتا*). I also came across another Muṣḥaf folio from the first century A.H. where in the same page, the same word has been written in two different ways.

¹⁴ For another sample page of the same Muṣḥaf, see Dr. W.H. Siddiqui and A.S. Islahi, *Hindi-Urdu Catalogue of the exhibition held on the occasion of the celebration of the 50th Anniversary of India's Independence and 200 years of Rampur Raza Library*, 2000, Plate No. 1.

was the same as reading *qāl* (قال) when the word is spelled *ql* (قل),¹⁵ which is a common abbreviation in the Ḥejāzī Muṣḥaf.¹⁶ Given that reading and recitation were based on an oral learning tradition, such shorthand did not threaten to corrupt the holy text. If a teacher recited قالوا (read as *qālū*, the *alif* at the end not being pronounced due a certain grammatical rule) and the student scribed it as قلو (following his own standard) but read it back correctly as قالوا, then the anomalous vowel spelling bore no ill consequences.

Ibn Abī Dāwūd narrates the following incident:

قال: حدثني يزيد الفارسي، قال: زاد عبيد الله بن زياد في المصحف ألفي حرف. فلما قدم الحجاج بن يوسف بلغه ذلك، فقال: من ولى ذلك لعبيد الله؟ قالوا: ولى ذاك له يزيد الفارسي، فأرسل إليّ، فانطلقت إليه، وأنا لا أشك أن سيقتلني. فلما دخلت عليه، قال: ما بال ابن زياد زاد في المصحف ألفي حرف؟ قال، قلت: أصلح الله الأمير، أنه وُلِدَ بكلاء البصرة، فتوالت تلك عني. قال: صدقت، فخلا عني. وكان الذي زاد عبيد الله في المصحف كان مكانه في المصحف «قلو» كاف لام واو، «كنو» كاف نون واو، فجعلها عبيد الله «قالوا» كاف ألف لام واو ألف، وجعل «كانوا» كاف ألف نون واو ألف.¹⁷

“Yazīd al-Fārsī said: ‘‘Uḥayyidullāh bin Ziyād added two thousand extra letters (حرف) in the Muṣḥaf. When al-Ḥajjāj bin Yūsuf came to Baṣra and was informed of this, he inquired who had carried out this alteration for ‘Uḥayyidullāh; the reply was Yazīd al-Fārsī. Al-Ḥajjāj therefore summoned me; I went to see him and had no doubt that he intended to kill me. He asked why ‘Uḥayyidullāh had requested the addition of these two thousand letters. I replied, ‘May Allāh keep you on the right path; he was raised up in the lowly community of Baṣra [i.e. far from the learned areas, in a region lacking literary taste and sophistication]’. This spared me, for al-Ḥajjāj said that I spoke the truth and let me go. What ‘Uḥayyidullāh wanted was simply to standardise the spelling within his Muṣḥaf, re-writing «قلو» as «قالوا», and «كنو» as «كانوا».”

As the matter did not involve corrupting the text but rather reinstating some vowels which had been dropped for abbreviation, al-Fārsī left al-Ḥajjāj’s

¹⁵ See Ibn Abī Dāwūd, *al-Maṣāḥif*, p. 105 (the printed text has been corrected). Teachers and students were bound to teach, learn and read orally according to the *ismāds* (which emanated directly from the Prophet) and within the boundaries of the ‘Uthmānī Muṣḥaf’s consonantal text. Mālik bin Dīnār’s reading was both true to the consonantal text and to the *ḥadīths* on which he based his recitation.

¹⁶ See for example F. Déroche and S.N. Nosedā, *Sources de la transmission manuscrite du texte Coranique, Les manuscrits de style higazi, Volume 2, tome 1. Le manuscrit Or. 2165 (f. 1 à 61) de la British Library*, Lesā, 2001, p. 54a.

¹⁷ Ibn Abī Dāwūd, *al-Maṣāḥif*, p. 117. The printed text has been corrected.

company unscathed. Referring to the concordance of the Qur'ān we note that قالوا occurs 331 times, while كانوا occurs 267 times: a combined total of 598 words. Recall that 'Ubaidullāh added two extra *alifs* in each of these, amounting to approximately 1,200 extra letters. The figure of two thousand (as mentioned in the narration) was probably a rough guess.

Ibn Abī Dāwūd's narrative bears a defective and weak *isnād*,¹⁸ giving scholars enough cause to reject it. But even if it were genuine, what 'Ubaidullāh was guilty of tampering with his own copy so as to bring it in accordance with the prevalent spelling conventions, nothing more. For another example we turn to the Muṣḥaf copied by Ibn al-Bawwāb in 391 A.H./1000 C.E., which I have compared against the Muṣḥaf printed in Madinah in 1407 A.H./1987 C.E.

<i>Muṣḥaf of Ibn al-Bawwāb</i>	<i>Muṣḥaf of Madīna</i> ¹⁹
أبصارهم	أبصرهم
شياطينهم	شيطينهم
طغيانهم	طغينهم
ظلمات	ظلمت

The very beginning of *Sūra al-Baqara* alone provides these four instances. The custom for most printed Muṣḥafs now is to adhere faithfully to the 'Uthmāni spelling system; the word مالك (*mālik*) for instance is written ملك (*malik*) following the 'Uthmāni orthography, though a tiny *alif* is placed after the *mām* to clarify the pronunciation for the contemporary reader. Similarly a few verses still spell قل as قال,²⁰ indicating that this abbreviation was valid in 'Uthmān's time and that he allowed the inclusion of both.

Modern publishers, by basing their copies on the official 'Uthmāni orthography, have provided us with a rich reference point for the spelling conventions of Islam's first century. And it is indeed the best option for every publisher, given the benefits of mass printing and the (roughly) standardised nature of modern education. The reluctance to deviate from 'Uthmān's orthography is nothing new however. Imām Mālik (*d.* 179 A.H.) was solicited over twelve centuries ago for his legal opinion (*fatwā*) on whether one should copy the Muṣḥaf afresh by utilising the latest spelling conventions; he resisted the idea, approving it only for school children. Elsewhere ad-Dānī (*d.* 444

¹⁸ The chain of witnesses who were involved in transmitting the event; see Chapter 12 for a detailed discussion of the *isnād* system in general.

¹⁹ These words, in the printed Muṣḥaf, all contain a tiny *alif* to aid the pronunciation.

²⁰ See for example Qur'ān 23:112, 23:114 and 43:24.

A.H.) maintained that all scholars from Mālik's time to his unanimously shared this same conviction.²¹

سئل مالك عن الحروف تكون في القرآن مثل الواو والألف أترى أن تُغير من المصحف إذا وجدت فيه كذلك؟
قال: لا.
قال أبو عمرو: يعني الواو والألف الزائدتين في الرسم، المعدومتين في اللفظ، نحو الواو في ... «الربوا» وشبهه، ونحو الألف في ... «أو لا أذبحنه» ... وشبهه، وكذلك الياء في نحو ... «أفأين مت» وما أشبهه.²²

Imām Mālik was approached about certain vowels in the Muṣḥaf which are silent; he dismissed the idea of eliminating them. Abū 'Amr (ad-Dānī) comments, "This refers to the extraneous and silent *waw* and *alif*, such as *waw* in ... الربوا, *alif* in ... أو لا أذبحنه, and also the *ya*' in ... أفأين مت." This indicates that Imām Mālik was against any institutionalised updating; while scribes may have chosen to incorporate different conventions in their own copies, in his mind such conventions were never to receive precedence or sanction over 'Uthmān's orthography.

3. The Nuqaṭ (Dotting) Scheme in Early Muṣḥafs

From orthography we now switch our focus to palaeography.²³ Just as in the previous chapter we placed Arabic palaeography in a historical perspective, so now we place it in the context of the Qur'ān and examine its development. Much of this discussion will revolve around *nuqaṭ* (نقط: dots), which in the early days of Islam embodied a dual meaning:

1. Skeletal dots:

These are dots placed either over or under a letter to differentiate it from others sharing the same skeleton, such as *h* (ح), *kh* (خ) and

²¹ Ad-Dānī, *al-Muqni'*, p. 19. Some scholars have suggested that the Muṣḥaf be written in accordance with their period's prevailing conventions. One such scholar is 'Izz bin 'Abdus-Salām [az-Zarakshī, *Burhān*, i:379]. Others writing on this topic include: Ibn Khaldūn, who favours change [Shalabī, *Rasm al-Muṣḥaf*, p. 119]; Ḥifnī Naṣīf, who is against any change [*ibid*, p. 118]; The Azhar's *fatwā* board, which decided to stick to the early orthographic system [*ibid*, p. 118]; The Saudi committee of major 'ulema, who also decided in 1979 to maintain the old system; and A similar consensus was reached by the World Muslim League [al-Finaisān (ed.), *al-Badi'*, Introduction, p. 41].

²² Ad-Dānī, *al-Muqni'*, p. 36.

²³ As a reminder: orthography refers to spelling conventions, while paleography (in this context) deals with a language's script, with the shape of its letters and the placement of dots etc.

j (ج). Known as *nūḡaṭ al-i'jām* (نقط الإعجام), this system was familiar to Arabs prior to Islam or, at the latest, in Islam's youth – preceding 'Uthmān's Muṣḥaf as we will soon demonstrate.

2. Diacritical marks:

Known in Arabic as *tashkīl* (تشكيل: i.e. *ḍamma*, *fathā*, *kasra*) or *nūḡaṭ al-i'rāb* (نقط الإعراب);²⁴ these can take the form of dots or more conventional markings, and were invented by Abū al-Aswad ad-Du'alī (c. 10 B.H. – 69 A.H./611 – 688 C.E.).²⁵

We will cover both of these schemes at length.

i. Early Arabic Writings and the Skeletal Dots

The *rasm al-khaṭ* (lit: the drawing of the script) of the Qur'ān in the 'Uthmānī Muṣḥaf does not contain dots to differentiate such characters as *b* (ب), *t* (ت), and so on, and neither does it possess diacritical marks such as *fathā*, *ḍamma*, and *kasra*. There is a good deal of evidence to show that the concept of skeletal dots was not new to the Arabs, being familiar to them even prior to Islam. These dots were nevertheless absent from the earliest Muṣḥafs. Whatever the philosophy behind this may have been,²⁶ I will introduce some examples to prove that early Arabic palaeography did indeed have dots to accompany the skeleton of the characters.

1. The Raqūsh tombstone, the oldest dated pre-Islamic Arabic inscription, c. 267 C.E., contains dots on the letters dhāl, rā' and shīn.²⁷
2. An inscription, most probably pre-Islamic, at Sakāka (northern Arabia), written in a curious script:



Figure 10.2: A curious inscription found in Sakaka. Source: Winnet and Reed, *Ancient Records from North Arabia*, Figure 8. Reprinted with the publisher's kind permission.

²⁴ These are meant to represent short vowel sounds. Yet another name is *al-ḥaraka* (الحركة), and in Urdu they are known as *zair*, *zabar*, *paish* ... etc.

²⁵ Ad-Dānī, *al-Muḥkam*, p. 6. A renowned author, ad-Du'alī wrote his treatise on grammar (and invented *tashkīl*) probably around 20 A.H./640 C.E.

²⁶ See p. 95 for a discussion on the motive. Whether it caused divergences in the readings of the Qur'ān is subject of Chapter 11.

²⁷ For more detail, see p. 119.

The inscription (supposedly a combination of Nabataean and Arabic characters)²⁸ contains dots associated with the following Arabic letters: *n* (ن), *b* (ب) and *t* (ت).

3. A bilingual document on papyrus, dated 22 A.H.,²⁹ preserved at Österreichische Nationalbibliothek in Vienna:

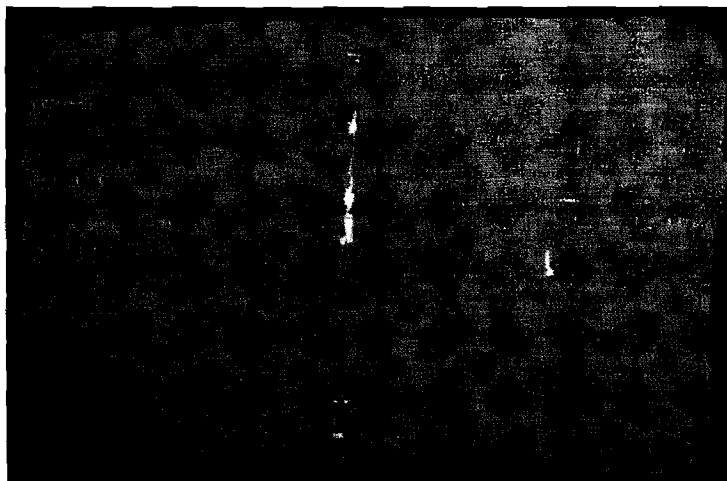


Figure 10.3: A dated bilingual document from Egypt. Source: Austrian National Library, Papyrus Collection, P. Vindob. G 39726. Reprinted with their kind permission.



Figure 10.4: The final line reads: Month of Jamād al-'Ulā from the year 22(A.H.) and written (by) Ibn Hudaïda.

This document hails from the reign of Caliph 'Umar bin al-Khaṭṭāb. The following Arabic characters have dots: *n* (ن), *kh* (خ), *dh* (ذ), *sh* (ش), and *z* (ز).³⁰

²⁸ F.V. Winnett and W.L. Reed, *Ancient Records from North Arabia*, University of Toronto Press, 1970, p. 11.

²⁹ M. Hamidullah, *Six Originaux des Lettres Diplomatiques du Prophete de L'Islam*, pp. 44-45; See also S. al-Munaggid, *Etudes De Paleographie Arabe*, pp. 102-3.

³⁰ Hamidullah in *Six Originaux des Lettres Diplomatiques du Prophete de L'Islam*, p. 47, reports that Grohmann [*From the World of Arabic Papyri*, Cairo, 1952, pp. 62, 113-4] committed numerous mistakes in reading the five lines of the Arabic text. In line 4, he read خمسة عشر whereas it is خمسة عشر; line 5, he read جملى الأول and ابن حديدو سنة and سنة اثنى whereas it is جملى الأولى and ابن حديدة and سنة اثنى respectively.

4. An inscription near Makkah, dated 46 A.H., contains a dot on the letter *b* (ب).³¹
5. Mu'āwiya dam near Madinah has an inscription that includes dots on the letter *t* (ت).³²
6. Another dam of Mu'āwiya. This one near Tā'if, with an inscription dated 58 A.H.



Figure 10.5: Inscription dated 58 A.H. on the dam of Mu'āwiya near Tā'if.

The following characters have dots: *ya* (ي), *b* (ب), *n* (ن), *th* (ث), *kh* (خ), *f* (ف) and *t* (ت).³³

In view of the above we can conclude that, up until 58 A.H., the following letters had been assigned dots to differentiate them from others bearing

³¹ A. Munif, *Dirāsa Fannīya li Muṣḥaf Mubakkir*, p. 139 quoting Grohmann, "Arabic Inscriptions", Louvain 1962, tome 1, pl. xxii, no. 2, p. 202.

³² *ibid*, p. 140 referring to a book by Dr. S. ar-Rāshid on Islamic City.

³³ S. al-Munaggid, *Etudes De Paleographie Arabe*, pp. 101-103 quoting G.C. Miles, "Early Islamic Inscriptions Near Taif, in the Hidjaz", *JNES*, vol. vii (1948), pp. 236-242.

the same skeletal shape: *n* (ن), *kh* (خ), *dh* (ذ), *sh* (ش), *z* (ز), *ya* (ي), *b* (ب), *th* (ث), *f* (ف) and *t* (ت). A total of ten characters. Concentrating on only the first three inscriptions, which predate 'Uthmān's Muṣḥaf, we find that dots were standardised into the same pattern that is in usage today.

Muḥammad bin 'Ubaid bin Aus al-Gassānī, Mu'āwiya's secretary, states that Mu'āwiya asked him to carry out some *tarqīsh* (ترقيش) on a particular document. Inquiring what was meant by *tarqīsh*, he was told, "To give every character its due dots." Mu'āwiya added that he had done the same thing once for a document he had written on behalf of the Prophet.³⁴ Al-Gassānī is not well known in traditionist circles, and this weakens his narrative,³⁵ but we cannot discount this incident in light of the irrefutable facts proving the early use of dots (however sparingly).

ii. The Invention of the Diacritical Markings

As mentioned earlier the diacritical marks, known in Arabic as *tashkīl* were invented by Abū al-Aswad ad-Du'alī (d. 69 A.H./688 C.E.). Ibn Abī Mulaika reports that during 'Umar's reign, a Bedouin arrived asking for an instructor to help him learn the Qur'ān. Someone volunteered, but began making such a string of mistakes while acting as tutor that 'Umar had to stop him, correct him, then order that only those with adequate knowledge of Arabic should teach the Qur'ān. With such an incident no doubt haunting his mind, he eventually requested Abū al-Aswad ad-Du'alī to compose a treatise on Arabic grammar.³⁶

Ad-Du'alī took his assignment to heart, composing the treatise and inventing four diacritical marks that could be posted on the concluding letter of each word. These took the form of coloured dots (to differentiate them from skeletal dots, which were black); initially they consisted of a single colour (red in the example below), with each dot's position signifying its specific mark. A single dot placed after, on, or below the letter constituted a *ḍamma*, *fathā* or *kasra*, respectively. Similarly two dots placed after, on, or

³⁴ Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *al-Jāmi'*, i:269.

³⁵ Refer to the chapter on Muslim methodology for greater details.

³⁶ Ad-Dānī, *al-Muḥkam*, pp. 4-5, footnote 2, quoting Ibn al-Anbārī, *al-Idāh*, pp. 15a-16a. An-Nadīm gives a detailed description of the manuscript of ad-Du'alī's treatise on grammar. He discovered it in Ibn Abī Ba'ra's library, consisting of four folios and copied by the famous Grammarian Yaḥyā bin Ya'mar (d. 90 A.H./708 C.E.). It contained the signature of another Grammarian, 'Allān an-Naḥawī, and beneath it the signature of an-Naḍr bin Shumail. [an-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, p. 46.] These signatures established the legitimacy of Abū al-Aswad ad-Du'alī's original authorship of the treatise.

below the letter indicated *ḍamma tanween* (double *ḍamma*), *fatha tanween* or *kasra tanween*, respectively³⁷ (this synopsis does little justice to his actual conventions, which were quite elaborate). During Mu'āwiya's reign (d. 60 A.H./679 C.E.) he accepted a commission to apply this dotting system to a copy of the Muṣḥaf, a task probably completed c. 50 A.H./670 C.E.

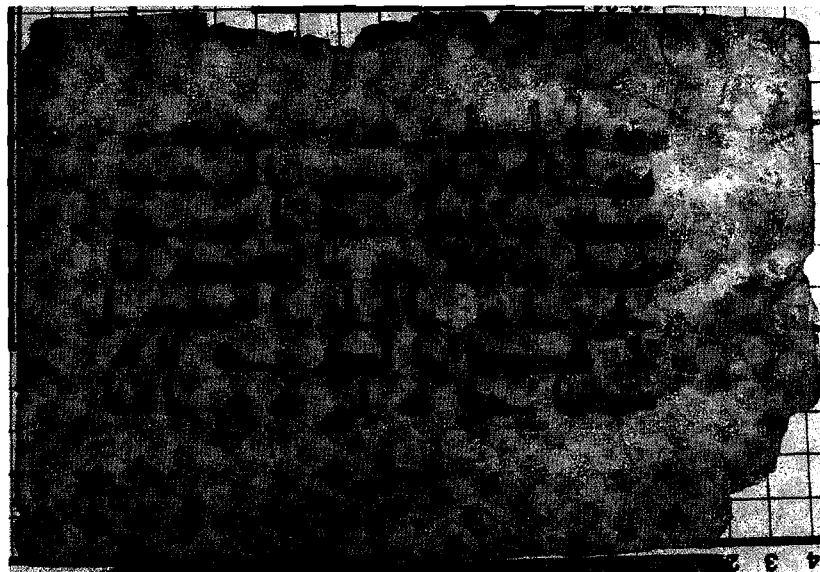


Figure 10.6: Example of a Muṣḥaf written in the Kūfīc script, bearing ad-Du'ālī's dotting scheme. Courtesy of the National Archive Museum of Yemen.

This scheme was transmitted from ad-Du'ālī to later generations through the efforts of Yaḥyā bin Ya'mar (d. 90 A.H./708 C.E.), Naṣr bin 'Āsim al-Laithī (d. 100 A.H./718 C.E.), and Maimūn al-Aqran, arriving at Khalīl bin Aḥmad al-Frāheedī (d. 170 A.H./786 C.E.) who finally altered this pattern by replacing the coloured dots with shapes that resembled certain characters.³⁸ Centuries lapsed, however, before al-Frāheedī's scheme finally superseded the earlier system.

Every centre appears to have practised a slightly different convention at first. Ibn Ushta reports that the Muṣḥaf of Ismā'īl al-Qusṭ, the Imām of Makkah (100-170 A.H./718-786 C.E.), bore a dotting system dissimilar to the one used by the Iraqis,³⁹ while ad-Dānī notes that the scholars of

³⁷ Ad-Dānī, *al-Muḥkam*, pp. 6-7.

³⁸ *ibid.*, p. 7.

³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 9.

Ṣan'ā' followed yet another framework.⁴⁰ Likewise, the pattern used by the Madīnites differed from the Baṣarites; by the close of the first century however, the Baṣarite conventions became ubiquitous to the extent that even the Madīnite scholars adopted them.⁴¹ Later developments witnessed the introduction of multi-coloured dots, each diacritical mark being assigned a different colour.



Figure 10.7: Example of a *Muṣḥaf* in the *Kūfī* script. The diacritical dots are multi-coloured (red, green, yellow, and a pale shade of blue). Note also the *āyah* separators and the tenth *āyah* marker, as discussed in Chapter 8. Courtesy of the National Archive Museum of Yemen

iii. Parallel Usage of Two Different Diacritical Marking Schemes

Khalīl bin Aḥmad al-Frāheedī's diacritical scheme won rapid introduction into non-Qur'ānic texts, so for the sake of differentiation the script and diacritical marks reserved for masterly copies of the Qur'ān were deliberately kept different from those that were common to other books, though slowly some calligraphers began to use the new diacritical system in the Qur'ān, however.⁴² I am fortunate to have a few colour pictures of the Qur'ānic

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 235.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. 7.

⁴² Some of those calligraphers are: Ibn Muqla (d. 327 A.H.), Ibn al-Bawwāb (d. circa 413 A.H.) ... *etc.* In fact Ibn al-Bawwāb even shied away from 'Uthmān's orthography. The current trend is to fall back to the early orthography, *e.g.* the *Muṣḥaf* printed by the King Fahd complex in Madinah [See p. 131].

fragments from the Ṣan'ā' Collection, through which the development of such schemes can be demonstrated.

Figures 10.6 and 10.7 (above) probably date from the second century A.H., while the next is an example of the Qur'ānic script from the third century A.H.⁴³

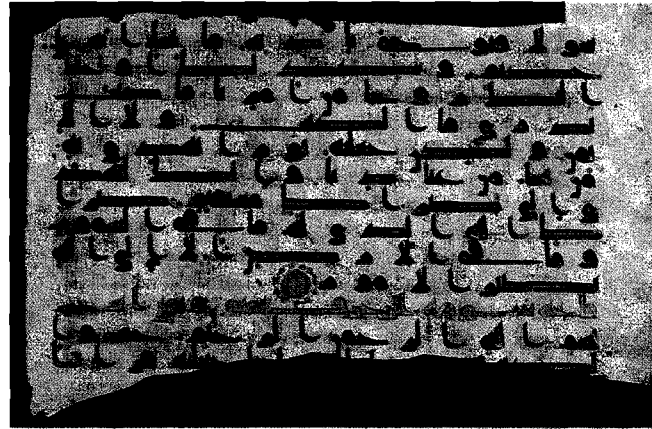


Figure 10.8: Example of Qur'ānic script from the third century A.H. Note again the multi-coloured dots. Courtesy of the National Archive Museum of Yemen

The next figure is an example of non-Qur'ānic script from the same period; the difference is readily visible in the script and in the schemes employed for skeletal dots and diacritical marks. For further examples, see Figures 10.11 and 10.12.

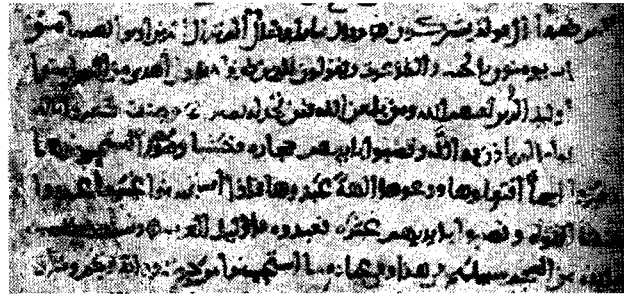


Figure 10.9: Example of a non-Qur'ānic script, end of the second century A.H. Note the diacritical marks, in line with al-Frāheedī's scheme. Source: A. Shākir (ed.), *ar-Risālah of ash-Shāfi'ī*, Cairo, 1940, Plate 6.

⁴³ Based on the description in the catalogue: *Maṣāḥif Ṣan'ā'*, Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah (Kuwait National Museum), 19 March – 19 May 1985, Plate no. 53. In this regard I have some reservations; for example, I believe that Figure 10.6 belongs to the late first century.

4. *Sources of the Skeletal and Diacritical Dotting Systems*

Father Yūsuf Sa'īd, mentioned by al-Munaggid as an authority on the history of alphabets, skeletal dotting systems and diacritical marks, contends that the Syrians may have been the first to develop the dotting system.⁴⁴ The reference here is to skeletal dots, as seen in such characters as: ح, ح, خ. His claim does not extend to the usage of diacritical markings. But Dr. 'Izzat Ḥasan (ed.), in his introduction to *al-Muḥkam fī Naqṭil Maṣāḥif*, takes the extra step and attributes the diacritical system to Syriac influence: as the Syrians were in the forefront of grammatical and dotting schemes, so the Arabs borrowed freely from them.⁴⁵ For this argument he quotes the Italian Orientalist Guidi, Archbishop Yūsuf Dāwūd, Isrā'īl Wilfinson, and 'Alī 'Abdul-Wāḥid al-Wāfi – this last simply repeating previous commentators. Dr. Ibrāhīm Jum'a has expressed the identical view of Arabs borrowing the diacritical system from the Syriac language, where he cites Wilfinson.⁴⁶ This is the conclusion of many others, including Rev. Mingana who (never one for sugar-coating his words) remarks,

The first discoverer of the Arabic vowels is unknown to history. The opinions of Arab authors, on this point, are too worthless to be quoted.⁴⁷

Asserting that Syriac universities, schools, and monasteries established a system between 450-700 C.E., he says, "[the] foundation of the Arabic vowels is based on the vowels of the Aramaeans. The names given to these vowels is an irrefutable proof of the veracity of this assertion: such like Phath and Phataha."⁴⁸ According to him, Arabs did not elaborate this system till the latter half of the 8th century C.E.⁴⁹ through the influence of the Baghdādi school, which was under the direction of Nestorian scholars and where the celebrated Ḥunain had written his treatise on Syriac grammar.⁵⁰

In the Syriac alphabet only two characters possess skeletal dots: dolath (dal) and rish (ra). By comparison the Arabic alphabet contains a total of fifteen dotted characters: ب, ت, ث, ج, خ, ذ, ز, ش, ض, ظ, غ, ف, ق, ن and ة. Imagining that the Arabs borrowed their multitudinous dots from the

⁴⁴ S. al-Munaggid, *Etudes de Paleographie Arabe*, p. 128. Al-Munaggid has shown some reservation about attributing the skeletal dots to Syriac influence.

⁴⁵ 'Izzat Ḥasan (ed.), *al-Muḥkam fī Naqṭil Maṣāḥif*, pp. 28-29.

⁴⁶ Ibrāhīm Jum'a, *Dirāsātun fī Taṭawwur al-Kitābāt al-Kūfiyya*, 1969, pp. 17, 27, 372.

⁴⁷ A. Mingana and A.S. Lewis (eds.), *Leaves from Three Ancient Qurāns Possibly Pre-Othmānic: with a list of their Variants*, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1914, p. xxxi.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. xxx.

⁴⁹ This translates to 150 A.H. and onwards, because 700-799 C.E. = 81-184 A.H.

⁵⁰ Mingana and Lewis (eds.), *Leaves from Three Ancient Qurāns*, p. xxxi.

Syriac becomes a difficult proposition; moreover we have clear pre-Islamic evidence of the usage of skeletal dots, hailing from the early 7th century and perhaps from as long ago as the 3rd century C.E.⁵¹

Now let us proceed to diacritical markings in Syriac, of which two sets exist. According to Yūsuf Dāwūd Iqlaimis, the Bishop of Damascus,

It is confirmed without doubt that in the life of Jacob of Raha, who died in the beginning of the 8th century C.E. there did not appear any diacritical marking method in Syriac, neither the Greek vowels, nor the dotting system.⁵²

According to Davidson though,⁵³ Jacob of Raha (*d.* 708 C.E.) invented the first set of markings in the 7th century, while Theophilus invented the second set (Greek vowels) in the 8th. Keeping in mind that the end of the seventh century C.E. corresponds to 81 A.H., and the end of the eighth to 184 A.H., the question becomes: who borrowed from whom? In light of what Davidson mentions the verdict could fall either way, so let us seek an answer by examining the scripts. The figure below illustrates some Syriac vowels.⁵⁴

ܐ	a	read	ah
ܝ or ܝܐ	e	„	ay
ܝܐ	i	„	ee
ܝܐܐ	o	„	oh
ܝܐܐܐ	u	„	oo

Figure 10.10: Examples of Syriac vowels.

The signs used by Jacob of Raha bear some resemblance to the Qur'ānic diacritical system. Now recall that the inventor of the Arabic system, Abū al-Aswad ad-Du'alī, died in 69 A.H. (688 C.E.), and that he dotted the entire Muṣḥaf during Mu'āwiya's reign *c.* 50 A.H./670 C.E. Suddenly the issue of who borrowed from whom becomes crystal clear. For six hundred years the Syriacs wrote their Bibles without any diacritical markings, though they boasted a university in Nisibis and several colleges and monasteries, all in operation since 450 C.E. Yet their diacritical marks were not conceived until

⁵¹ Refer back to the Raqūsh inscription, Chapter 9.

⁵² Yūsuf Dāwūd Iqlaimis Bishop of Damascus, *al-Lam'a ash-Shahiyya fī Naḥw al-Luḡa as-Siryāniyya*, 2nd edition, Moṣul, 1896, p. 169.

⁵³ B. Davidson, *Syriac Reading Lessons*, London, 1851.

⁵⁴ B. Davidson, *Syriac Reading Lessons*, London, 1851.

the late 7th/early 8th century, while ad-Du'ālī's dotted Muṣḥaf was finished in the third quarter of the 7th century C.E. Logic clearly dictates that Jacob copied the system from the Muslims. This is if we accept Davidson's claim; if we accept the verdict of the Bishop of Damascus however, then there is no need for even this argument.

As regards Rev. Mingana's allegation that the Arabs failed to elaborate this system till the latter half of the 8th century, consider the following:

1. There is a report that Ibn Sīrīn (*d.* 110 A.H./728 C.E.) possessed a Muṣḥaf originally dotted by Yaḥyā bin Ya'mar (*d.* 90 A.H./708 C.E.).⁵⁵
2. Khālīd al-Ḥadhdhā' used to follow the recitations of Ibn Sīrīn from a dotted Muṣḥaf.⁵⁶

Both incidents are much earlier than the proposed borrowing scheme.

Syriac grammar gained its identity through the efforts of Ḥunain bin Ishāq (194-260 A.H./810-873 C.E.);⁵⁷ contrary to Mingana's beliefs, Ḥunain's treatise on Syriac had no influence on Arabic grammar whatsoever because Sībawaih (*d.* 180 A.H./796 C.E.),⁵⁸ the greatest Arabic grammarian, died before Ḥunain was even born. Ḥunain himself was in fact a product of the Islamic civilisation. He learned Arabic in Baṣra, from a pupil of one of the students of the famous Muslim lexicographer Khalīl bin Aḥmad al-Frāheedī (100-170 A.H./718-786 C.E.).⁵⁹

5. *Orthographic and Palaeographic 'Irregularities' in Early Non-Qur'ānic Script*

Earlier we discussed how two different diacritical schemes were employed in parallel, one for the Qur'ān and another for all other works. We also noted the difference in the Qur'ānic and non-Qur'ānic scripts, and the scholars' legal opinion against modernising the spelling conventions found in 'Uthmān's Muṣḥaf. But what about the other books, how did they evolve in response to changes in the palaeography and orthography of the Arabic script?

⁵⁵ Ad-Dānī, *al-Naqt*, p. 129.

⁵⁶ Ad-Dānī, *al-Muḥkam*, p. 13.

⁵⁷ Ḥunain b. Ishāq (194-260 A.H./810-873 C.E.): Born at Ḥīra in a Christian (Syriac-speaking) family. "On account of his attitude to iconoclasm he was suspected of blasphemy and excommunicated by Bishop Theodosius ..." [J. Ruska, "Ḥunain b. Ishāq", *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, First edition, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1927, p. 336].

⁵⁸ Sībawaih (*c.* 135-180 A.H./752-796 C.E.): One of the greatest authorities on Arabic grammar, and the author of that famous tome, *al-Kitāb*. [See Kaḥḥāla, *Mu'jam al-Muw'allifīn*, ii:584.]

⁵⁹ Kaḥḥāla, *Mu'jam al-Muw'allifīn*, i:662.

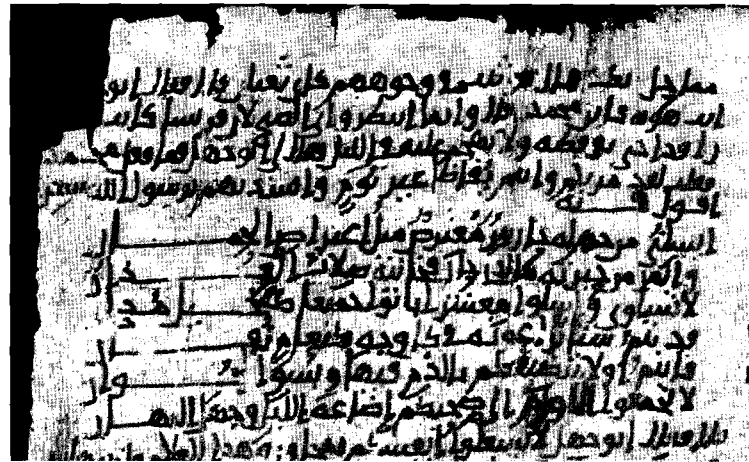


Figure 10.11: An example of non-Qur'ānic script dated 227 A.H.

Source: R.G. Khoury, *Wahb b. Munabbih*, Plate PB 9.

Reprinted with the publisher's kind permission.

Figure 10.11 is a sample half page from *Maghāzī Wahb bin Munabbih*, from a manuscript dated 227 A.H. Khoury provides a fine list of peculiar spellings that he encountered in this text,⁶⁰ a sample of which I have re-produced below:

Wahb MS	Modern spelling	Wahb MS	Modern spelling	Wahb MS	Modern spelling
اعدى	أعداء	سفها	سفهاء	المرة	المرأة
نساكم	نساءكم	هولى	هولاء	جاك	جاءك
اقرى	أقرأ	اوحا	أوحى	تلى	تلا
ظحا	ضحى	ظلت	ضلت	البلى	البلاء

Among the more interesting oddities are the word لئن spelled as لن (*i.e.* without ى), and قرأ spelled as قرى without any dots.

Figure 10.12 is a sample part page from Abū 'Ubaid's *Gharīb al-Ḥadīth* preserved at Leiden University Library. This manuscript is flooded with 'irregularities' in the skeletal dotting system.⁶¹ The letter *qāf* (ق): void of

⁶⁰ Raif G. Khoury, *Wahb b. Munabbih*, Otto Harrassowitz – Wiesbaden, 1972, Teil 1, pp. 22-27.

⁶¹ This list is not conclusive and is based on the portion shown. De Goeje has studied this manuscript in detail and observed further irregularities [M.J. de Goeje, "Beschreibung einer alten Handschrift von Abū 'Obaida's *Gharīb-al-ḥadīth*", *ZDMG*, xviii:781-807 as quoted in *Levinus Warner and His Legacy (Catalogue of the commemorative exhibition held in the Bibliotheca Thysiana from April 27th till May 15th 1970)*, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1970, pp. 75-76]. I thank Prof. J.J. Witkam for this reference and the colour image.

dots (red arrow: lines 1, 2 and 4); with a single dot underneath (green arrow: lines 3 and 4); with two dots above the character (blue arrow: last line). The isolated *ya'* (ي):⁶² void of dots (light blue arrow: line 3); as before but in a different form (violet arrow: last line); with two dots underneath (yellow arrow: line 8).

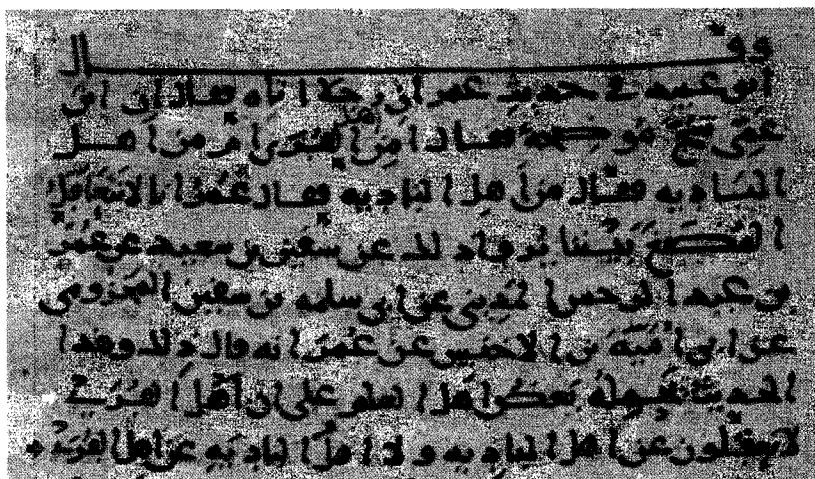


Figure 10.12: Another example of a non-Qur'ānic script, dated 252 A.H.

Source: Leiden University Library, manuscript no. Or. 298, f. 239b.

Reproduced with their kind permission.

The interesting point is that all these 'irregularities' take place within a single page. Surely a single copyist was involved, but his decision to script these letters in multiple styles suggests that all were equally valid, and reinforces what we discussed earlier regarding the numerous permissible forms given to the three vowels, ا, و, ي. 'Irregularity' itself exists only in our judgment since, if both styles were permissible at the time, we cannot in good conscience label the scribe as inconsistent. Whatever reason we conjure up for the liberal palaeography of that era is actually unimportant. Islamic methodology dictates that every student must learn directly from a teacher and is never entitled to study any text on his own; so long as this oral tradition remained, and the teacher was able to decipher the irregularities in his own handwriting, there was no risk of corruption.

Hundreds of excellent references are devoted to the spelling and dotting schemes used in Muṣḥafs, and for further reading I suggest: (1) *Kūtāb an-*

⁶² In scripting isolated *ya'*, the scribe used two different skeletons. See for example the third line (blue arrow) and the last line (violet arrow).

Naqṭ by Abū 'Amr ad-Dānī (371-444 A.H.). Published by al-Azhar University, Cairo; and (2) *Al-Muḥkam fī Naqṭ al-Maṣāḥif* by ad-Dānī, edited by Dr. 'Izzat Ḥasan, Damascus, 1379 (1960).

Interested readers should also consult the introduction to *al-Badī fī Rasm Maṣāḥif 'Uthmān* (pages 43-54), edited by al-Funaisān, where he cites eighty works on this topic. The main purpose of these works is to educate the reader on the 'Uthmāni conventions, and not to suggest that these were in any way flawed or underdeveloped. We have already observed the discrepancies between 17th century written English and that of modern times, and if we view these changes as an evolutionary process (instead of proclaiming one or the other as flawed) then that is surely the attitude we must extend to Arabic.

6. Conclusion

Skeletal dots (known to Arabs prior to Islam) and diacritical marks (a Muslim invention) were both absent from 'Uthmān's endeavours to independently compile the Qur'ān. By its consonant-heavy and dotless nature, it was uniquely shielded from the guiles of anyone attempting to bypass oral scholarship and learn the Qur'ān on his own; such a person would be readily detected if he ever dared to recite in public. In his reluctance to incorporate extraneous material into the Muṣḥaf, 'Uthmān was not alone: Ibn Mas'ūd was of a similar mind. At a later date Ibrāhīm an-Nakha'ī (*d.* 96 A.H.), once noticing a Muṣḥaf with added headings such as "The Beginning of [such-and-such] *Sūra*," found it distasteful and ordered that they be erased.⁶³ Yaḥyā bin Abī Kathīr (*d.* 132 A.H.) notes,

Dots were the first thing incorporated by Muslims into the Muṣḥaf, an act which they said brought light to the text [*i.e.* clarified it]. Subsequently they added dots at the end of each verse to separate it from the next, and after that, information showing the beginning and end of each *sūra*.⁶⁴

Recently I came across a harsh comment on Qur'ānic orthography, which insisted that we should follow the modern Arabic layout and discard the conventions of those who scripted the 'Uthmāni Muṣḥaf as the folly of illiterates. I wholly disagree. It is sheer folly, on the part of this person and such giants as Ibn Khaldūn, to forget the inevitable evolution of language

⁶³ Ad-Dānī, *al-Muḥkam*, p. 16.

⁶⁴ See Ibn Kathīr, *Faḍā'il*, vii:467.

over time; do they believe that, after the passing of a few centuries, others would not step forward to denounce *their* efforts as the work of illiterates? A Book that has resisted any universal alterations for fourteen centuries is living proof that the text within belongs to Allāh, Who has appointed Himself as Guardian. The inviolability of the original, immaculately preserved for so long, is not to be suffered the tampering and adjustments meted out to the Biblical Scriptures.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ The full scope of these tamperings will become evident in Chapters 15 and 17.

CAUSES OF VARIANT READINGS

One of the gateways for an Orientalist assault on the Qur'ān is distortion of the text itself. In my estimate there are over 250,000 copies of the Qur'ān in manuscript form, complete or partial, from the first century of Hijra onwards. Errors are classified in academic circles into the dual categories of deliberate and unintentional, and in this vast collection of manuscripts it is a certainty that many copyists must have committed unintentional errors. Scholars who deal with this subject know very well what fatigue or a momentary lapse of concentration can engender, as discussed at length in the following works: (1) Ernst Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament*, 2nd edition revised and enlarged, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1995; (2) Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, Oxford Univ. Press, 1993; and (3) Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, 3rd enlarged edition, Oxford Univ. Press, 1992.

The first of these relates to the OT and the others to the NT. All three meticulously categorise mistakes of this nature with terms like transposition, haplography, and dittography, occasionally probing into the very mind of the now-deceased scribe to show what distraction must have flashed through his mind as he committed his silly mistake thousands of years ago.¹ But this same treatment is not afforded the Qur'ān, and in fact many errors – obvious scribal blunders resulting from exhaustion – are treated as genuine variants, as evidence of corruption in the Muslim Holy Book.

True that it is difficult to ascertain whether an error is intentional or deliberate; let us therefore tackle the two possibilities together, as the end result in both is textual corruption.

As we have seen, the 'Uthmāni Muṣḥaf was thoroughly dotless. Goldziher asserted that divergences in the readings of the Qur'ān were due to faults in early Arabic palaeography, being dotless (*i.e.* no skeletal dots) and without diacritical markings. Thus a skeleton such as فـل, when bereft of its dots and diacritical marks, can possess several possible readings such as: فـل، قـل، قـل، قـل. These mean, respectively: he was killed, elephant, before, front portion of the body, to kiss and it was said.² In this chapter I will try

¹ Refer to pp. 243-4 and pp. 287-9.

² For a discussion on when such a text, lacking dots, can cause corruption and when it is harmless, refer to section 3 in this chapter.

to negate the idea that dotless Arabic palaeography could have resulted in any kind of corruption, distortion, or tampering within the Qur'ān.

1. *The Qirā'at is Sunna*

Knowledge of correct *qirā'at* (the science of proper recitation) comes from the Prophet himself, a *sunna* which dictates the manner of reciting each verse. Aspects of this are intrinsically linked with the Qur'ānic revelations: the text was revealed verbally, and by promulgating it verbally the Prophet simultaneously provided both text and pronunciation to his community. Neither can be divorced from the other.

'Umar and Hishām bin Ḥakīm once differed in reading a verse from *Sūra al-Furqān*; having learned this passage directly from the Prophet, 'Umar asked Hishām who had taught him. He replied, "The Prophet."³ A similar incident occurred with Ubayy bin Ka'b.⁴ None of these Companions were innovating so much as a syllable: all minutiae of recitation had been inherited from the Prophet.

We also find a grammarian⁵ who declared that reciting certain words in this or that fashion was grammatically preferable in his opinion, through alteration of diacritical marks which bore no weight on the meanings. Yet scholars held steadfast to the manner of recitation that arrived through authoritative channels, refusing his innovation and insisting that *qirā'at* is a *sunna* which no one has the authority to change.

We must note that people were not casually purchasing Muṣḥafs from the local bazaar, having finished their morning shopping at the greengrocers or fishmongers, and taking them home to memorise sūras by themselves.⁶ Verbal schooling from an authorised instructor was required, generally at

³ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Faḍā'il al-Qur'ān:5.

⁴ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Musāfirīn, ḥadīth no. 273.

⁵ Ibn Shanbūdh (*d.* 328 A.H.). See this work p. 205.

⁶ As mentioned in pp. 105-7, the trade in Muṣḥafs rose to prominence by the middle of the first century A.H. The manner of Islamic education was to instruct pupils in the skills of literacy, followed immediately (or concurrently) with a reading of the Holy Qur'ān from cover to cover, under appropriate guidance. The Qur'ān was thus the first book they learned, and by its completion they were in a strong position to master the Arabic language. Naturally they had a need for their own copies of the Muṣḥaf afterwards, whether to refresh the memory or to use for instructing others, and so the purchaser of the Muṣḥaf from the local bazaar was already well versed in the art of *qirā'at* from his or her early days of schooling, already familiar with the sūras that lay within. Only in recent times has this pattern of using the Qur'ān as a teaching aid somewhat relaxed (sadly).

the rate of five verses a day. Such was the pace as late as the first quarter of the 2nd century Hijra when Abū Bakr b. 'Ayyāsh (*d.* 193 A.H.) went to learn the Qur'ān from Ibn Abī an-Najūd (*d.* 127 A.H.) in his youth.⁷ The point is that no reading emanated from a vacuum or some innovator's personal guesswork; where more than one authoritative reading existed, the source of this multiplicity was traceable to the Prophet. During the life of the Companions a book appeared on the subject of multiple readings, envisaged on a small scale.⁸ With time larger works evolved, comparing the recitation of famous scholars from different centres and culminating in the work of Ibn Mujāhid.

2. *The Need for Multiple Readings: Simplifying Recitation for Unaccustomed Masses*

The unity of dialect which the Prophet had been accustomed to in Makkah vanished with his arrival in Madinah. Islam's spread over the Arabian expanses meant the incorporation of new tribes with new dialects, and for some of them the purity of the Quraishi vernacular proved difficult. In his *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Muslim quotes the following *ḥadīth*.

Ubayy bin Ka'b reported that the Prophet was near the locale of Banū Ghifār when Jibrīl came to him and said, "Allāh has commanded you to recite the Qur'ān to your people in one dialect." To this he said, "I ask Allāh's pardon and forgiveness. My people are not capable of this." He then appeared for the second time and said, "Allāh has commanded that you should recite the Qur'ān to your people in two dialects." The Prophet replied, "I seek pardon and forgiveness from Allāh, my people would not be able to do so." Jibrīl came for the third time and said, "Allāh has commanded you to recite the Qur'ān to your people in three dialects," and again he responded, "I ask pardon and forgiveness from Allāh. My people would not be able to do this." He then came to him for the fourth time and stated, "Allāh has permitted you to recite the Qur'ān to your people in seven dialects, and in whichever dialect they recite, they will be correct."⁹

⁷ Ibn Mujāhid, *Kitāb as-Sab'a*, p. 71.

⁸ See Arthur Jeffery (ed.), *Muqaddimatān fi 'ulūm al-Qur'ān* (*Two Muqaddimas to the Qur'ānic Sciences*), Cairo, 1954, p. 276. It is worth noting that prior to Ibn Mujāhid some forty four works had already been authored on the subject [Dr. 'Abdul Hādī al-Faḍlī, *Qirā'at Ibn Kathīr wa Atharuhā fi ad-Dirāsāt an-Naḥawīyya* (*Ph.D. Thesis*), University of Cairo, 1975, pp. 60-65, as quoted by Ghānim Qaddūrī, *Rasm al-Muṣṣaḥaf*, p. 659].

⁹ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Kitāb aṣ-Ṣalāt, *ḥadīth* no. 1789, as translated into English by A. Siddiqi (with some modifications).

Ubayy (bin Ka'b) also reported,

عن أبي، لقى رسول الله ﷺ جبريل عليه السلام عند أحجار المراء، فقال رسول الله ﷺ لجبريل: إني بعثت إلى أمة أميين، فيهم الشيخ العاصي، والعجوزة الكبيرة، والغلام. قال: فمرهم فليقرأوا القرآن على سبعة أحرف.¹⁰

The Prophet encountered Jibrīl at the mirā' stones [on the outskirts of Madinah, near Qubā'] and told him, "I have been sent to a nation of illiterates, among them is the prowling sheikh, the old woman and the young." Jibrīl replied, "So command them to recite the Qur'ān in seven *ahruf* (dialects)."

Over twenty Companions have narrated *ḥadīths* confirming that the Qur'ān was revealed in seven dialects (سبعة أحرف).¹¹ To this we can add that forty scholarly opinions exist as to the meaning of *ahruf* (literally: letters). Some of these opinions are very far fetched, but most agree that the main objective was to facilitate the Qur'ān's recitation for those who were unaccustomed to the Quraishi dialect. Such a concession was granted through the grace of Allāh.

Earlier we saw how these variant dialects resulted in disputes a few decades later, prompting 'Uthmān to prepare a Muṣḥaf in the Quraishi dialect. The end tally for all multiple readings found in the skeletons of five official Muṣḥafs did not exceed forty characters, and all dispatched reciters were obligated to follow this skeletal text and to reveal which authority they had learned their recitations from. Zaid b. Thābit, so central to the collection of the Qur'ān, stated that, «القرءة سنة متبعة»¹² ("The *qirā'at* is a *sunna* that is strictly adhered to"). These are details which we covered in previous chapters.

The term 'variants' is one that I dislike using in such cases because a variant results, by definition, from uncertainty. If the original author pens a sentence one way, and the sentence is then corrupted due to scribal errors, then we have introduced a principle of uncertainty; a subsequent editor who is unable to distinguish the correct wording from the incorrect will place what he believes to be the correct version in the text, whilst citing the others in margins. Such is the *variant* reading. But the Qur'ān's case differs distinctly because the Prophet Muḥammad, Allāh's sole vicegerent for the *wahy*'s reception and transmission, himself taught certain verses in multiple ways. There is no principle of doubt here, no fog or confusion, and the word 'variant' fails to convey this. *Multiple* is a far more accurate description, and so in that spirit I will refer to them here as multiple

¹⁰ Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, v:132, ḥadīth no. 21242.

¹¹ See as-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, i:131-141.

¹² As-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, i:211.

readings. One reason behind this phenomenon was the divergence of accents in Arabia and the need to accommodate them in the short term, as discussed above. A second reason may have been an attempt to better elucidate the various shades of meaning within a particular verse by supplying two wordings, each one being sanctioned by Allāh. A well-known example of this is in *Sūra al-Fātiḥa*, where the fourth verse can be recited as *mālik* (Owner) or *malik* (King) of the Day of Judgement. Both wordings were taught by the Prophet and therefore constitute multiple, rather than variant, readings.

Not surprisingly, Orientalist scholars have rejected the Muslim explanation and sought to cement theories of their own. As a natural extension to his efforts towards a critical edition of the Qurʾān, meant to highlight variations, Arthur Jeffery agreed in 1926 to collaborate with Prof. Bergsträsser in preparing an archive of materials from which it would some day be possible to write a history of the development of the Qurʾānic text.¹³ In his quest he examined roughly 170 volumes – some from reliable, but most from unreliable, sources. His collection of variants takes up some 300 pages in printed form, covering the personal Muṣḥafs of approximately thirty scholars. In this chapter I will limit myself to critical examination of this aspect of Jeffery's efforts, his work on variants. Other aspects will be tackled later.

3. Main Cause of Multiple Readings (Variants): the Orientalist View

According to Jeffery, the lack of dots in ʿUthmān's Muṣḥaf meant that the reciter was at liberty to supply his own markings, in accordance with the context and meaning of the āyah as he perceived it.¹⁴ If he came across a dotless word which could be read: *تَعْلَمَهُ*, *تُعْلِمُهُ*, *يُعْلِمُهُ* or *يَعْلَمُهُ* he had a *choice of characters*, using whichever dots and marks were necessary to conform the verse to his understanding of it. Prior to Jeffery's time, Goldziher and others also asserted that the use of the early dotless script had engendered variations. To bolster his claim, Goldziher provided a few potential examples and divided them in two parts.¹⁵

¹³ A. Jeffery, *Materials for the History of the Text of the Qurʾān*, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1937. I may add that Jeffery uses a host of Judeo-Christian jargon in arranging this archive: "Canonization by Ibn Mujāhid", p. 11; "Muslim Massora", p. 3, 5 (footnote); and using † for death instead of *d.* (a cross so as to Christianise the poor soul!), p. 14, etc.

¹⁴ A. Jeffery, "The Textual History of the Qurʾān", in A. Jeffery, *The Qurʾān as Scripture*, R.F. Moore Co., Inc., New York, 1952, p. 97.

¹⁵ ʿAbdul-Ḥalīm Najjār, *Madhāhib at-Tafsīr al-Islāmī*, Cairo, 1955, pp. 9-16. This is an Arabic translation of Goldziher's work.

1. Variations due to lack of skeletal dots. Three examples will suffice:
 - a. وما كنتم تستكبرون can be read: وما كنتم تستكبرون.¹⁶
 - b. إذا ضربتم في سبيل الله فتيثوا can be read: إذا ضربتم في سبيل الله فتيثوا.¹⁷
 - c. وهو الذي يرسل الرياح بشرا can be read: وهو الذي يرسل الرياح نشرا.¹⁸
2. Variations due to lack of diacritical markings.

For those unfamiliar with the history of *qirā'at*, such examples may seem valid. But all theories must be tested before they can be deemed viable however, and Islamic studies are unfortunately littered with ones that have been drafted and pressed into service without the benefit of testing. So let us evaluate their premises.

Jeffery and Goldziher completely ignored the tradition of oral scholarship, the mandate that only through qualified instructors could knowledge be gained. A great many Qur'ānic phrases contextually allow the inclusion of more than one set of dots and diacritical marks, but in the lion's share of cases, scholars recite them in just one way. Where variations arise (and this is rare) the skeleton of both readings remains faithful to the 'Uthmāni Muṣḥaf, and each group can justify its reading based on a chain of authority extending back to the Prophet.¹⁹ With this we can easily dismiss the notion of each reciter whimsically supplying his own dots and marks. Had there been even a semblance of fact in their theories, consider then the number of reciters and the thousands of skeletons that can be read in four or five ways; would not the list of variants run into hundreds of thousands or perhaps millions? In the Muṣḥaf's entirety Ibn Mujāhid (*d.* 324 A.H.) counted roughly one thousand multiple readings only.²⁰ To compare theory with reality is to demonstrate the fallacy of their hypotheses.

A few concrete examples will help to cement my point.

- (a) First example (in the first column, the word in question is marked in different colour; the middle column is the sūra:verse reference):

¹⁶ Qur'ān 7:48. This is a false example, see Ibn Mujāhid, *Kitāb as-Sab'a*, pp. 281-2.

¹⁷ Qur'ān 4:94.

¹⁸ Qur'ān 7:57.

¹⁹ The Muslim community at large did not trouble itself with *isnāds* when memorising the Qur'ān, because this was impractical and unnecessary for the layman given the Qur'ān's ubiquitous presence in every home and on every tongue. Professional reciters and scholars did follow *isnāds* however, as they were guardians entrusted with making sure that the text reaching the public was accurate and free of corruptions. Even I, writing in the 15th century A.H./21st century C.E. can provide an *isnād* for the recitation of the Qur'ān.

²⁰ Scholars examining 'Uthmān's official copies noted differences in forty characters; these were based on divergences in the skeleton itself. Ibn Mujāhid's one thousand multiple readings are due to the varying placement of dots and marks on certain words, in addition to the skeletal differences.

مَلِكٍ يَوْمَ الدِّينِ	1:4	Some recite مَالِك and some مَلِك
قُلِ اَللّٰهُمَّ مَلِكِ الْمَلِكِ	3:26	Unanimously read مَالِك
مَلِكِ النَّاسِ ﴿١١٤﴾ اِلٰهِ النَّاسِ	114:2-3	Unanimously read مَلِك

The colored word can be contextually read in all three verses as either مَالِك or مَلِك.

(b) Second example:

وَإِنْ يَرَوْا سَبِيلَ الرُّشْدِ	7:146	Some read رُشْد others رَشْد
وَهِيَ لَنَا مِنْ أَمْرِنَا رَشْدًا	18:10	Unanimously read رَشْدًا
لِأَقْرَبَ مِنْ هَذَا رَشْدًا	18:24	Unanimously read رَشْدًا
أَنْ تَعْلِمَ مِنْ مِمَّا عُلِّمَتْ رَشْدًا	18:66	Some read رُشْدًا others رَشْدًا
يَهْدِي إِلَى الرُّشْدِ	72:2	Unanimously read رُشْد
أَمْرًا أَدَّيْتُمْ رُشْدًا	72:10	Unanimously read رَشْدًا
فَأُولَئِكَ تَحَرَّوْا رَشْدًا	72:14	Unanimously read رَشْدًا
لَا أَمْلِكُ لَكُمْ ضَرًّا وَلَا رَشْدًا	72:21	Unanimously read رَشْدًا

Lexicographically both forms are valid in each case.

(c) Third example:

مَا لَا يَمْلِكُ لَكُمْ ضَرًّا وَلَا نَفْعًا	5:76	Unanimously read ضَرًّا
لَا أَمْلِكُ لِنَفْسِي نَفْعًا وَلَا ضَرًّا	7:188	Unanimously read ضَرًّا
لَا أَمْلِكُ لِنَفْسِي ضَرًّا وَلَا نَفْعًا	10:49	Unanimously read ضَرًّا
وَلَا يَمْلِكُ هُمْ ضَرًّا وَلَا نَفْعًا	20:89	Unanimously read ضَرًّا

وَلَا يَمْلِكُونَ أَنْفُسَهُمْ ضَرًّا وَلَا نَفْعًا	25:3	Unanimously read ضَرًّا
لَا يَمْلِكُ بَعْضُكُمْ لِبَعْضٍ نَفْعًا وَلَا ضَرًّا	34:42	Unanimously read ضَرًّا
إِنْ أَرَادَ بِكُمْ ضَرًّا	48:11	Some read ضَرًّا others ضَرًّا

Again, lexicographically both forms are valid in each case.²¹

I could spill much ink in citing more examples, but the above are sufficient to prove my point. There are literally thousands of instances where two forms of a word are both contextually valid but only one is collectively used; so many instances in fact, that they cease to be coincidence and overwhelm Jeffery and Goldziher's theories.

Let us ask: in incorporating dots into a dotless text, when does a textual error cause corruption and become harmful? When we do not have the means for distinguishing what is correct from what is not, then this is cause for alarm. Suppose that we have two manuscripts, each bearing one of the following: قَبِلَ الْمَرْأَةَ ثُمَّ هَرَبَ "He kissed the woman, then ran away", and قَتَلَ الْمَرْأَةَ ثُمَّ هَرَبَ "He killed the woman, then ran away". Now in the absence of a context with which to extract a clue, deciding which is right becomes impossible; clearly we have a textual problem confronting us. Assume next that we have ten manuscripts with different transmission chains, nine of them containing: قَبِلَ الْمَرْأَةَ ثُمَّ هَرَبَ "He kissed the woman, then ran away", while the tenth bears قَتَلَ الْمَرْأَةَ ثُمَّ هَرَبَ, that is, "Woman's elephant then he ran away." Besides being absurd, this sentence is contrary to the other nine manuscripts that unanimously agree on a sensible meaning, so that discarding the 'elephant' reading becomes the only sensible answer. The same holds true for Qur'ānic manuscripts. If we select one hundred Muṣḥafs, originating from numerous locales and each bearing a different hand-writing and a different date, and if all but one in this entire collection completely agree – moreover, if the aberrant one makes no sense – then any rational person will attribute the aberrancy to a scribal error.

Jeffery accuses Muslims of tampering with their Book.

When we come to the Qur'ān, we find that our early manuscripts are invariably without points or vowel signs, and are in Kūfic script very different from the script used in our modern copies. The modernizing of the script and the orthography, and supplying the text with points

²¹ For a detailed study of this topic, see 'Abdul-Fattāh al-Qāḍī, "al-Qir'āt fi Naẓar al-Mustashriqīn wa al-Mulḥidīn", *Majallat al-Azhar*, Ramaḍān 1390/1970 onwards.

and vowel signs, were it is true, well intentioned, but they did involve a tampering with the text. That precisely is our problem.²²

He commits a blunder by claiming that the earliest known Muṣḥafs were in the Kūfic script, for in fact they were in the slanted Ḥejāzī script as reproduced in Figure 7.1.²³ Moreover he considers the Kūfic script very different from what is used in modern times, and deems this updating of script to be a form of tampering. Suppose I scribble an entire article by hand and send it off to the publisher, should I then hold him guilty of tampering when I see my article splashed out in Helvetica or Times New Roman? Had Arabic been a dead language, such as Hieroglyphic, and had the Qur'ān been lost for a few hundred years, as with the Torah, then textual tampering may have reared its head: for we would then be attempting to decipher a long lost book in an unreadable script, imposing our guesswork throughout. In reality though the Kūfic script is still readable today, and the oral nature of the Qur'ān's transmission is instilled in Muslims to this day, making it abundantly clear that Jeffery has no case for his hue and cry.²⁴

4. *Secondary Cause of Multiple Readings (Variants)*

In collecting research material, Jeffery has employed the Orientalists' methodology while rejecting the Muslim technique of critically evaluating *isnāds*.²⁵ He describes his criteria:

And those of the analytic camp, their method is to collect *all* opinions, speculations, conjectures, and inclinations so to conclude through scrutiny and discovery which of it agrees with the place, time and conditions at the time taking into consideration the text irrespective of the narration

²² A. Jeffery, "The Textual History of the Qur'ān", in A. Jeffery, *The Qur'an as Scripture*, pp. 89-90.

²³ The Kūfic script achieved prominence shortly afterwards, towards the middle of the first century A.H. Refer to the Kūfic inscription in Figures 9.12-9.14 (dated respectively 40, 80 and 84 A.H.).

²⁴ Here we can mention that most Orientalists believe in the OT as Scripture, despite the Hebrew script having been altered twice and the diacritical marks not being supplied to the consonantal text till the 10th Century C.E., a span of twenty five centuries. Surely this massive gulf had an irreparable impact on the Hebrew text used today. [See this work pp. 238-56.]

²⁵ The chain of witnesses who were involved in transmitting the event. Refer to the next chapter.

chain. To establish the text of the Torah and the Bible in a similar way when establishing the text of Homer's poetry or the letters of Aristotle, the philosopher.²⁶

Certainly we cannot relive the past, but we can recall parts of it through the witness system and its valuations. It is thoroughly dishonest, in dealing with witnesses, to place the testimony of a trustworthy and accurate person at the same level as that of a known liar. Such is the Muslim scholar's standpoint. Yet Jeffery's methodology gives credence to the claims of liars over the honest ones;²⁷ so long as their purpose was served, he and his colleagues accepted all variant material allegedly ascribed to Ibn Mas'ūd or anyone else, regardless of how unknown or unreliable the source, while downplaying the wealth of well-known readings.

He argues that aside from the lack of dots (which I have responded to), variances also emerged because some reciters utilised texts predating 'Uthmān's Muṣḥaf, which occasionally differed from the 'Uthmāni skeleton and which were not destroyed despite the Caliph's orders.²⁸ But this claim is brandished without any supporting evidence. His collection of variants from Ibn Mas'ūd's Muṣḥaf, for example, is void from the start because none of his references even cites a 'Muṣḥaf of Ibn Mas'ūd'. Most of his evidence simply states that Ibn Mas'ūd recited this verse in that way with no proof or chains of narration; it is nothing more than gossip, pure hearsay, and to elevate it from its low character and use it as an argument against well-proven recitations, is to refuse the distinction between a narrator's honesty and falsehood.²⁹

Jeffery's allegations extend beyond Ibn Mas'ūd however, so here I will briefly tackle an aberrant report which states that Caliph 'Alī read a verse in contradiction to the 'Uthmāni Muṣḥaf. The reading is: (العصر ونائب) [adding two extra words in verse 103:1].³⁰ The author of *al-Mabānī*³¹ denounced this report as false on three counts:

²⁶ See Arthur Jeffery's (ed.), *al-Maṣāḥif*, Introduction (in Arabic), p. 4.

²⁷ This is akin to someone who owns a house for generations and has all the necessary deeds and proof to back his claim, only to chance across a miserable looking stranger who appears from nowhere and starts claiming the house as his. Employing Jeffery's methodology we have to accept the stranger's claim and evict the current tenant because the stranger's story is aberrant, sensationalistic, and contrary to what everyone else is saying.

²⁸ See Jeffery (ed.), *al-Maṣāḥif*, Introduction, pp. 7-8.

²⁹ Ibn Mas'ūd's 'Muṣḥaf', and Jeffery's analysis of it, are important topics for which I have devoted much of Chapter 13.

³⁰ A. Jeffery, *Materials*, p. 192.

³¹ A. Jeffery (ed.), *Muqaddimatān*, pp. 103-4.

- a. 'Āṣim bin Abī an-Najād, one of the most prominent students of as-Sulamī, who in turn was 'Alī's most respected student, relates that 'Alī read this verse exactly as given in the 'Uthmāni Muṣḥaf.
- b. 'Alī ascended to the caliphate after 'Uthmān's assassination. Had he believed that his predecessor was guilty of omitting certain words, surely it was his obligation to rectify the error. Else he would have been accused of betraying his faith.
- c. 'Uthmān's efforts enjoyed the backing consensus of the entire Muslim community; 'Alī himself said that no one voiced any objections, and were he displeased he would surely have been vociferous.³²

This scene alone, of the Prophet's Companions in their thousands eyeing the bonfire as old Qur'ānic fragments were tossed in, is a powerful testimony that they all assented to the purity of the Muṣḥaf's text. No additions, subtractions, or corruptions. Anyone who rejects this view and brings forth something new, claiming it as a pre-'Uthmānic text which was favoured by this or that Companion, is slandering the very faith of these Companions. Even Ibn Abī Dāwūd, author of *al-Maṣāḥif* and the purveyor of many variant *qirā'ats* which clash with the 'Uthmāni text, categorically denies their value as Qur'ān. He says, "We do not submit that anyone should recite the Qur'ān except what is in 'Uthmān's Muṣḥaf. If anyone recites in his prayer against this Muṣḥaf, I will order him to re-do his prayer."³³

The formative stages of the OT and NT occurred in epochs of great volatility, the political realities throwing the two texts into complete disarray. In seeking to replicate these vices in the Qur'ānic text, Western scholars view all Muslim evidence with a jaundiced eye whilst the OT and NT are given the benefit of the doubt whenever possible.³⁴ While misgivings on the authenticity of his variant material linger in Jeffery's mind, he nevertheless fills his book with them.

Some of the variants seem linguistically impossible... Some give one the impression of being the inventions of later philologists... The great majority, however, *merit* consideration as genuine survivals from the pre-'Uthmānic stage of the text, though only after they have passed the most searching criticism of modern scholarship... shall we be free to use them in the attempted reconstruction of the history of the text.³⁵

³² See this work p. 94.

³³ Ibn Abī Dāwūd, *al-Maṣāḥif*, pp. 53-54.

³⁴ Recently I happened to re-read the cover jacket of Juynboll's work, *Muslim Tradition*, whose cover picture is taken from the oldest *dated* Arabic manuscript on record written on paper. The note reads (emphasis added): "This manuscript was *allegedly* copied in 252 A.H./866 A.D." How many times can we expect to see such discretion in their dealings with the OT, NT and other literature?

³⁵ A. Jeffery, *Materials*, Preface, p. x. Emphasis added.

This merit, and Jeffery's "searching criticism of modern scholarship", are sadly nothing more than slogans flaunted about with little or no meaning.

5. *Altering a Word for its Synonym During Recitation*

Goldziher, Blachère and others uphold that in early Muslim society, changing a word in the Qur'ān for its synonym was perfectly tolerable.³⁶ Their basis for this claim is two-pronged:

- Aṭ-Ṭabarī reports through 'Umar that the Prophet said, "O 'Umar, all of the Qur'ān is correct [*i.e.* it will remain valid if you accidentally skip some verses], unless you mistakenly slip from a verse espousing Allāh's mercy for one that informs of His Wrath, and vice versa."³⁷

This *ḥadīth* has proven itself a fertile ground for active imaginations, for those insisting that synonyms could be used freely so long as the spirit of the words was sustained. Was this ever the case? We know from our legalistic dealings that no author will consent to have his wording replaced by a slew of synonyms, irrespective of how accurately chosen. In the Qur'ān's case, not being the product of earthly authorship, even the Prophet did not possess the authority to alter its verses. So how is it that he should allow others to do so?³⁸ If a person misquotes an office clerk accidentally, its impact may be minimal, but misquoting a magistrate will instigate far greater repercussions; how then if one *intentionally* misquotes the Almighty Himself?

Anyone with a habit of reciting from memory knows well how easily the mind can slip, jumping to another sūra half a Muṣḥaf away while the person continues unaware. In fearing mistakes of this nature, people may have chosen to refrain entirely from reciting from memory. Ever mindful of encouraging his Companions to memorise and recite as much as possible, the Prophet's statement was a great relief to the community's apprehensions on this account.

- The second basis for this Orientalist claim is that, in many instances, the *qirā'at* of Ibn Mas'ūd and others were peppered with exegetical commentary (قراءة تفسيرية). Al-Bukhārī records the following:

³⁶ R. Blachère, *Introduction au Coran*, 1947, pp. 69-70; see also 'Abduṣ-Ṣabūr Shāhīn, *Tārīkh al-Qur'ān*, pp. 84-85.

³⁷ Aṭ-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, i:13.

³⁸ Qur'ān 10:15 reads: "And if Our verses are recited to them in all their clarity, those who do not wish to meet Us retort, 'Bring us a Qur'ān other than this, or alter it'. Say [O Muḥammad], 'It is not for me to change it of my own accord; I only follow what is revealed to me. I dread, should I disobey my Lord, the punishment of a most tremendous day.'"

Narrated Nāfi', "Whenever Ibn 'Umar recited the Qur'ān he would not speak to anyone till he had finished. Once I held the Qur'ān while he recited *Sūra al-Baqara* from memory; he stopped abruptly at a certain verse and asked, 'Do you know in what connection this verse was revealed?' I replied, 'No.' He said, 'It was revealed in such-and-such connection.' He then resumed his recitation."³⁹

From this we can deduce that some scholars proffered explanatory notes to their listeners during the course of recitation.⁴⁰ This cannot be considered a valid variance in *qir'at* nor can we assume it to be part of the Qur'ān. Some Orientalists allege that these scholars were attempting to improve upon the Qur'ān's text; such a claim is blasphemous, insinuating that the Companions regarded themselves as more knowledgeable than Allāh the All-Knowing, the All-Wise.

6. Conclusion

Having examined Jeffery and Goldziher's hypotheses, and considered the appropriate evidence, we have no recourse but to cast their theories aside. The variations they predict are nowhere to be found, in countless instances where a skeleton can contextually admit more than one set of dots and markings; the rare cases of authoritative divergence in *qir'at* by their very nature harbour no impact on the meaning of the text.⁴¹ Goldziher himself acknowledged this,⁴² as did Margoliouth:

In numerous cases the ambiguity of the script which lead to a variant reading was of little consequence.⁴³

In their eagerness to prove textual corruption on a par with the OT and NT, Orientalists discount the religio-political condition of the newly

³⁹ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, vi:38, ḥadīth no. 50.

⁴⁰ 'Abduṣ-Ṣabūr Shāhīn, *Tārīkh al-Qur'ān*, pp. 15-16. Here Goldziher admits that some of the additions were exegetical in nature.

⁴¹ A far cry from many of the Biblical variations found in manuscripts, such as John 1:18 ("an only One, God" and "the only begotten Son"), which contain a world of difference. And according to P.W. Comfort, the literal translation is "a unique God" [*Early Manuscripts & Modern Translations of the New Testament*, Baker Books, 1990, p. 105]. For detail see the discussion on manuscript p75 (Bodmer Papyrus XIV-XV) in pp. 286-7.

⁴² 'Abdul-Ḥalīm Najjār, *Madhāhib at-Tafsīr al-Islāmī*, pp. 12-13.

⁴³ D.S. Margoliouth, "Textual Variations", *The Moslem World*, Oct. 1925, vol. 15, no. 4, p. 340.

born Muslim state, and how it differed from the turmoil of the Judeo-Christian communities in their infancies. The disparity could not be more striking. A child of well-established lineage is being compared with one abandoned before an orphanage, and the irony is that in determining the parentage of this known child, the procedure for the abandoned one is being insisted on. I have endeavoured to show the gaping flaws in Orientalist logic but, as my previous experiences have taught me,⁴⁴ I expect that all these observations will go totally ignored by that camp. Here I simply seek to point out the fallacy of their approaches, but I am very much aware that these duels of refutation must end somewhere; otherwise Muslim scholars will be kept busy in an endless war of words.

As for the pious Muslim there can be no question that Allāh, vowing repeatedly to preserve His Book, would never have selected a 'defective' language or script to carry the burden of His final revelations. In its literary capacity, depth of expression, poeticism, orthography and palaeography, Arabic was sufficiently advanced that Allāh blessed it as His choice from among all others. And from then it was the privilege of the Muslim masses to continue reciting it in the original, and to incorporate markings so that non-Arabs may also recite the original with ease.

Long have I alluded to the Islamic methodology and its pivotal role in preserving the *qirā'at* of the Qur'ān and the *sunna* of the Prophet free from adulteration throughout the centuries. Examining this methodology in detail is the aim of my next chapter.

⁴⁴ Most of my early work, such as *Studies in Early Ḥadīth Literature*, my criticism of Goldziher, and *On Schacht's Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (a work devoted to refuting Schacht), are all serious academic works which Prof. John Burton labelled as 'Islamic Perspective' [*An Introduction to the Ḥadīth*, Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1994, p. 206] and which have been generally ignored in academic circles.